

Salvation in the Old Testament

A Central Theme

By James K. Zink

THE OLD TESTAMENT CENTERS in the theme that God has entered history and has demonstrated his power in behalf of the people of Israel: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."¹ The Old Testament is, therefore, as Richardson states, "kerygmatic in character";² that is, it makes a proclamation concerning the salvation of Israel.

In discussing the subject of salvation in the Old Testament, the Christian has a particular problem, for he is often much more aware of the New Testament conception of salvation than the pre-Christian view of the Old Testament. The danger persists that one conversant with the New Testament will give to the Hebrew words translated as "salvation" (*t'shû'â*, *y'shû'â*, *yēsha'*) the same meaning as the Greek *sotēria* (salvation). This practice is recognized by Pedersen who cautions:

Salvation instinctively suggests the idea of something beyond, a deliverance from the misery of this world into another world. When we use the word with relation to the Old Testament, we must know that the meaning is a different one, life and happiness here always being bound up with this earth.³

Pedersen goes too far when he says that life and happiness in the Old Testament are "always . . . bound up with this earth," but his caution is very valuable. A distinction must be made between the conception of salvation in the Old and New Testaments. In the New Testament salvation is related almost entirely to remission of sins, atonement, and eschatology. In the Old Testament the emphasis is on the promises of the covenant as they relate to this life. The Old Testament view of life is predominantly that retribution takes place in the present world. This fact explains the dilemma of Job; his problem concerning the nature of divine retribution could hardly be imaginable in the New Testament, for there the teaching is that all accounts will be set right in the afterlife, and one is admonished to leave injustice to the wrath of God.⁴

1. Ex. 20:2.

2. Alan Richardson, "Salvation, Savior," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, IV (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 168.

3. Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, II (London: Oxford University Press, reprinted 1959), p. 330.

4. Rom. 12:19.

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In order to gain a clearer understanding of the Old Testament point of view, the covenant promises in such a passage as Leviticus 26 should be investigated. In this account the blessings and cursings are pronounced upon Israel for their obedience or disobedience to God's laws and statutes. On this basis salvation in the Old Testament should be considered primarily as this-worldly. Salvation basically is the deliverance and preservation of the nation from its oppressors. Therefore, the fearful Israelites are exhorted by Moses: "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation (*y'shû'â*) of the Lord, which he will work for you today."⁵ The individual also is delivered from his personal enemies and from difficult situations:

"Arise, O Lord!
Deliver me, O my God!
For thou dost smite all my enemies on the cheek,
Thou dost break the teeth of the wicked.
Deliverance (*y'shu'a*) belongs to the Lord."⁶

Even in the matter of the forgiveness of sins the view in the Old Testament is on the present world. As Jacob points out, the law was "given to the elected people as a means of being able to live within the covenant."⁷ Through transgression the covenant was violated and renewal was necessitated. The aim in the cult of sacrifice was atonement, the avoidance of the penalties of disobedience and the obtaining of the blessings of obedience. Thus even the heart-rending appeal of such a penitential prayer as Psalm 51 which pleads for the mercy of God and his cleansing power and for the restoration of the joy of God's salvation (*yēsha'*) ends with an apparent appeal for the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and reinstitution of the sacrificial rites.

It cannot, of course, be denied that there is an eschatological hope in the Old Testament idea of salvation. Salvation does, at times, relate to the future, but the passages where this emphasis is found are exceptional.⁸ It should also be observed that these hopes or longings are not based on any explicit promises found in the terms of the covenant. Concerning this point, Smith writes:

Here the question arises: "From what did Jehovah save His people?" The commonest answer by far is: "From all kinds of physical misfortune—from slavery in Egypt; from drought, famine and pestilence; from enemies; from exile in Babylon, and so on."⁹

5. Ex. 14:13.

6. Ps. 3:7-8.

7. Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Aycock (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 273.

8. Ps. 49:15; Is. 26:18-19; Dan. 12:1-2.

9. C. Ryder Smith, *The Bible Doctrine of Salvation* (London: The Epworth Press, 1941), p. 20.

The Modes of Salvation

The preceding discussion demonstrates that the term "salvation" may not be restricted to a single meaning in the Old Testament. The intention has been primarily to present a caution, pointing out that attention must be given to the range of denotations which the Hebrew word for salvation and its related terms have in the Old Testament.¹⁰ There are at least three different terms of reference involved: (1) national salvation, protection from foreign foes, securing of blessings and restoration of the exiled people; (2) individual salvation from the results of sin, deliverance from enemies, disease and trouble; (3) eschatological salvation from sin issuing in a richer life in communion with God in the present world and in the afterlife.

These different emphases cannot be absolutely categorized; they are interrelated and shade into each other. This fact is especially true of the nontheological uses of the terms for salvation, for "the secular or nontheological use of the 'save' words passes over almost imperceptibly into the religious sense."¹¹ In a real sense every act of God on behalf of Israel, even if it be only a military victory of seemingly minor importance or relief from a summer drought, has a religious connotation because of the special relationship between God and his people.

Salvation is sometimes a nontheological term in the Old Testament when used with relation to national salvation. The word may have a purely physical meaning. In the blessing of Moses (Deut. 33) the power of God in military action is described in this manner:

"The eternal God is your dwelling place,
and underneath the everlasting arms.
And he thrust out the enemy before you
and said Destroy.

Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you,
A people saved (*nosha'*) by the Lord."¹²

This use is indicated by the descriptions which are given of the heroes of Israel. The slaying of the thousand Philistines by Samson (Judg. 15:18) is regarded as a day of great deliverance (*t'shû'â*). The judges and early monarchs appear as saviors or deliverers.¹³ A typical use of the root *y-sh-* in this sense is found in 2 Samuel 8:14: "The Lord gave victory to David

10. Some of the frequently occurring words involved in the salvation vocabulary are: (a) *y'shû'â* and its cognates, from the root meaning to be broad or spacious and signifying help and victory; (b) *pādhâ* relating to redemption, the verb meaning to ransom or redeem, to take an object out of possession of another person by giving an equivalent; (c) *gā'al* meaning to do one's duty as a kinsman is rendered redeemer or vindicator; (d) *n-ts-l*, occurring in the passive and causative forms, meaning to deliver. These words demonstrate the variety involved in the idea of salvation in the Old Testament.

11. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

12. Deut. 33:27, 29.

13. Judg. 3:31; 6:15; 1 Sam. 9:16; 10:27; 11:12-13; 23:5.

wherever he went." In these cases reference is made to the ability of the hero to repel the force of invaders and deliver the nation from oppression.

In a very real sense the king was the savior of the people; his purpose was to work salvation. Mowinckel emphasizes this aspect of the kingship by drawing a parallel between the ideal kingship in Israel and the function of the king in the ancient Near East. He points out that what is meant is "not only deliverance from earthly, cosmic, and demonic enemies, and from distress and misfortune, but good conditions, well-being, outward and inward prosperity, fertility in field, flock, and nation, quietness and order in the state, 'peace,' and the like."¹⁴

The function of the king, therefore, as God's appointed leader is to secure peace and blessings for the community. On the other hand, because the king is a divinely appointed leader there is more than just a nontheological meaning of salvation in this connection. It is God who sends the savior; every deliverance comes from God. The biblical point of view is that there is no salvation of any kind except from God. The divine work is closely associated with the monarchy. Eichrodt points out that in the portrayal of the great heroes of Israel symbolic language and a series of stereotyped forms are used which put them in the category of redeemers and saviors called and guided by God.¹⁵

The individual also hopes for deliverance from the trouble that surrounds him. The afflicted man may cry out in his anguish for deliverance:

"Deliver my soul from the sword . . .
save me (*y-sh-*) from the mouth of the lion."¹⁶

The Psalms are replete with the anguished cries of the downtrodden who look for the salvation of God.

But there is more to salvation than simply the hope for temporal or physical prosperity; there is the appeal for deliverance from sin:

"Restore to me the joy of thy salvation (*y-sh-*)

Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
thou God of my salvation (*y-sh-*)."¹⁷

In Psalm 130 the penitent worshiper prays to God and ends his supplication with the promise:

14. Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, trans. G. W. Anderson (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 47. The conception of the king as the one whose duty it is to establish peace and harmony in the community and provide for the physical welfare of the citizens is encountered among the Sumerians as early as 2050 B.C. in the reign of Ur-Nammu; see Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 83-85.

15. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, I, trans. J. A. Baker (Lodon: SCM Press, 1961), p. 475.

16. Ps. 22:20, 21.

17. Ps. 51:12, 14. The construct form *'lōhē y'shū'āthi* would be rendered better as "my God of salvation."

"O Israel, hope in the Lord!
 For with him is plentiful redemption (*p-dh-h*).
 And he will redeem (*p-dh-h*) Israel from all
 his iniquities."¹⁸

There is also hope expressed for some better end for man than the depths of Sheol: "God will ransom (*p-dh-h*) my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me."¹⁹

In the above examples is illustrated the aspect of individual salvation from the results of sin, deliverance from enemies, disease and trouble. The outstanding feature of each is the dependence placed upon God. Israel stands in a unique relationship with God. The relationship was created by God's work of salvation and it is within the relationship that Israel is able to obtain and maintain salvation. It is important, therefore, to investigate what made it possible for Israel to remain in this privileged position.

Salvation and Sacrifice

It has been previously pointed out that the ties between God and Israel were actualized in the covenant which God established with his elect people. Through the covenant Israel is able to live in communion with God. Through the law Israel is able to maintain the covenant relationship with God. The provisions of the law regarding sacrifice are not incidental to the idea of salvation but occupy a central place. Sacrifice enables the people to enjoy a renewal of the covenant relationship which was broken by sin. In the various acts in the sacrificial cult the theme of salvation is present. As examples the following cases may be considered.

In Deuteronomy, in the case of the offering of the first fruits, there is a reminiscence of the election of Israel. As the basket containing the produce of the earth is given to the priest to be placed before the altar, the worshiper is to say to the priest: "I declare this day to the Lord your God that I have come into the land which the Lord swore to our fathers to give to us." Then, as the basket is placed before the altar the response is made to the Lord: "A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there . . ." A brief resumé of the bondage in Egypt and the deliverance of Israel is given.²⁰

In this sacrifice, the people now established in the land of promise are reminded of God's redemptive act in history. In regard to this sacrifice Pedersen states: "The whole of the sacrifice centering round the idea of the first-fruits is the offering of the agriculturalists, and among the Israelites it is indissolubly bound up with the land of Canaan."²¹ To this statement it

18. Ps. 130:7-8.

19. Ps. 49:15.

20. Deut. 26:1-11.

21. Pedersen, *Israel*, IV, p. 313.

may be added that the offering of the first-fruits was indissolubly bound up with the land of Canaan by virtue of the inheritance of the land by Israel in accordance with the promise of God. This is not just a matter of an agriculturalist's response to God; rather, there is a theological overtone which is carefully pointed out in Deuteronomy 26.

In connection with the sanctification of the first-born the election theme is mentioned. The basic concept involved here is that every first-born creature belongs to God. These dedicated creatures are to be offered as sacrifice to God unless there is a redemption of them. This demand relates to all first-born: "consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and beast, is mine."²² Provision is made for the redemption of the human first-born son,²³ and it is important to note that in this case reference is made to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt:

Every first-born of men among your sons you shall redeem. And when in time to come your son asks you "What does this mean?" you shall say to him, "By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage."²⁴

The redemption of the first-born son was effected by the substitution of an animal. This act was a memorial to the act of national salvation which had been performed. God had done something for Israel and the monumental act was commemorated by the people in their worship.

Sacrifice, however, is more than a memorial to salvation; it does more than recall the primary act of national salvation which God wrought through the Exodus. For example, the Passover and feast of unleavened bread, which according to Exodus 12:1-13:10 were commemorative of the Exodus, had the feature of redemption from sin connected with the ceremonies performed in these observances. In connection with the Passover there was "a sin offering to make atonement (*kipper*)."²⁵ Rylaarsdam notes that the terminology "the Lord's Passover" (Ex. 12:11, 12, 27), which is certainly reminiscent of the passing over and sparing of the "houses of the people of Israel," "simultaneously . . . may well refer to the ritual action by which this redemptive and protective work of the Lord is both celebrated and made presently available for Israel."²⁶ Elliott, following Smith, asserts: "The Hebrew word for making atonement (*kipper*) is never used of the Passover."²⁷ However, as Smith points out, there were sacrifices "offered at

22. Ex. 13:2.

23. Ex. 22:29; 34:20.

24. Ex. 13:13-14, cf. Deut. 16:1-8.

25. Num. 28:22, cf. Ezek. 45:22.

26. J. C. Rylaarsdam, "Passover," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, III (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 666.

27. Ralph Elliott, "Atonement in the Old Testament," *Review and Expositor*, LIX (January, 1962), p. 8; cf. Ch. Ryder Smith, *The Bible Doctrine of Salvation*, p. 70: "The term *kipper* . . . is never used of the Passover."

Passover in the Temple"²⁸ including "one male goat for a sin offering to make atonement (*kippēr*) for you."²⁹ Atonement is not related to the Passover lamb itself, but an atonement sacrifice is connected with the festival.

These examples serve to demonstrate the relationship between the sacrificial cult and salvation. It was through the cult that the people maintained their relationship with God and his salvation. Through the cult of sacrifice both the national and individual aspects of salvation were celebrated as past events and present realities.

Salvation and the Hope of Israel

Another aspect of the Old Testament idea of salvation is the eschatological view. The Old Testament emphasis on the present world includes the hope for a glorious future for Israel. This eschatological view of salvation is especially present in the prophetic books of the Old Testament. There is a hope there that in the future God will do some great work for Israel which would be comparable to the Exodus of the past. During the Exile the desire for redemption became fully developed, and the prospect of return was described in terms comparable to the Exodus:

"Fear not, O Jacob my servant, says the Lord,
nor be dismayed, O Israel;
for lo, I will save (*y-sh-*) you from afar,
and your offspring from the land of their captivity.
Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease,
and none shall make him afraid."³⁰

The analogy with the Exodus is also implied in Jeremiah 31:31-34 in the promise of a new covenant between God and Israel.

Another figure occurring in the hope for future salvation is that of creation. An important passage in this respect is Isaiah 65:17-18:

"Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind.
But be glad and rejoice for ever
in that which I create;
for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing,
and her people a joy."

From this point the prophet goes on to describe the joys and pleasures of the new creation in which there is peace, harmony, security and long life.

The prophets were aware that the new age would come only after much trouble and travail. Therefore, even in the middle of his promise of the

28. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

29. Num. 28:22. Technically this sacrifice relates to the feast of unleavened bread; but, as Smith says (p. 69), "at some unknown date, this feast [Passover] and the Feast of Unleavened Bread became practically one."

30. Jer. 30:10.

the object of much critical investigation in recent years, this fact is not really germane to this study. In the recital of God's work, as in the festival of the Passover, reference is made to a definite event, not simply to abstractions concerning God. The determining experience of God's salvation of Israel was the deliverance from Egyptian bondage for there the relationship between God and Israel became firm.

Throughout the Old Testament an emphasis is put on the unique relationship between Israel and God. Amos, for example, stresses the unique character of God's demonstration of his power to save Israel: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth."⁴⁰ Hosea also takes up the theme and portrays the relation between God and his people in the most intimate terms. This attitude, which stresses the special favor of God for Israel, is also common to Deuteronomy: "You are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the people that are on the face of the earth."⁴¹

The Old Testament speaks with a strong declarative voice concerning God's works. Contrary to the interpretation that many Christian exegetes have traditionally put upon it, the Old Testament is not "just a record of hope deferred until the coming of a new era . . . it . . . witnesses to the actual realization of redemption on the part of God's people."⁴² The people of Israel experienced God's power and were witnesses to it.

40. Amos 3:2.

41. Deut. 7:6.

42. Otto J. Baab, "The God of Redeeming Grace," *Interpretation*, X (April, 1956), p. 134.

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